

Guest Column: Yurok judge joins Hillary and Chelsea Clinton's new documentary

September 20, 2022



On September 9, Yurok Chief Judge Abby Abinanti and her Tribal Court team were featured in *Gutsy*, a new documentary series created by Hillary Clinton and Chelsea Clinton. Based on The New York Times bestselling book, “The Book of Gutsy Women,” the much-anticipated docuseries presents diverse perspectives on a wide variety of topics, ranging from environmental protection to prison reform. For the Apple TV+ series, Hillary Clinton and Chelsea Clinton interviewed some of the most influential women of the 21st century, including: Gloria Steinem, Dr. Jane Goodall, Megan Thee Stallion, Wanda Sykes, Amy Schumer, Yurok Chief Judge Abby Abinanti, Goldie Hawn, Kate Hudson, Kim Kardashian and many more.

“Judge Abby Abinanti is the embodiment of a gutsy woman,” said Yurok Tribal Council Member Sherri Provolt. “Throughout her illustrious career, Judge Abinanti has made a lasting positive impact in our community and across Indian Country. I can’t wait to see the documentary on Friday night.”

“I would like to sincerely thank the Clintons for the opportunity to share the key tenets of the Yurok Wellness Court with the world. The culturally centered Wellness Court has dramatically transformed the lives of many Yurok people,” said Yurok Chief Judge Abby Abinanti. “I believe the primary components of the court can greatly improve the US justice system too.”

The *Gutsy* production crew filmed with the Yurok Tribal Court last December. Shortly after her arrival, Yurok Chairman Joseph L. James, Vice Chairman Frankie Myers and Tribal Council Member Sherri Provolt

welcomed the former US Secretary of State to Yurok Country. During her visit to the redwood region, the Tribal Court team took the American icon on a tour of Yurok ancestral territory, including a visit to the recently renamed Sue-meg State Park. They also spent time in the Yurok Tribal Courtroom, where Chief Judge Abinanti, or Judge Abby as she is known to most, presides over Yurok Wellness Court cases at eye level, rather than atop an elevated bench. A manifestation of Judge Abinanti's leadership, the Wellness Court provides a path to healing for those affected by drugs and/or alcohol abuse through intensive, culturally relevant substance abuse treatment.

Born and raised in Humboldt County, Judge Abinanti is the first Native American woman admitted to the State Bar of California. Starting in 1994, Judge Abinanti served as a State Judicial Officer (Commissioner) for the San Francisco Superior Court for two decades in the Unified Family Court (Family/Dependency/Delinquency) before she started to build the Yurok Tribal Court from the ground up. Some of the most reputable news outlets in the US have published positive stories about the Tribal Court and Judge Abinanti. The Nation called the Tribal Court "a model for criminal justice reform." In an LA Times story, Judge Abinanti was described as "an Indian person who was a force to be reckoned with and yet just very kind." In 2021, the National Judicial College named Chief Judge Abinanti a Judicial Hero and Legend for her role in the rapid expansion of the Tribe's justice system.

Today, the Yurok Tribal Court administers one of the most advanced justice systems in Indian Country. In fact, multiple Tribes have used the Yurok Tribal Court as a blueprint to development their own justice systems. The Yurok Tribal Court is rooted in the traditional philosophy of restorative justice, which originates from the Tribe's longstanding village values. This traditional approach to dispute resolution aims to create space for the offender to take responsibility for their transgression, while working with the victim and the court to identify the best course of action to correct the wrong.

Seeing the success of the Tribal Court, two local courts have partnered with Chief Judge Abinanti in an effort to improve outcomes in off-reservation cases involving tribal families. During Joint Family Wellness Court proceedings in Humboldt County, Chief Judge Abinanti sits parallel to her counterpart in the Superior Court. Yurok Judge William Bowers occupies an identical function in Del Norte County Superior Court. This unique partnership provides a framework for tribal and state court judges to adjudicate cases in a collaborative manner. It also establishes an avenue for tribal citizens to receive much-needed supportive services from the tribe and county.

The Yurok Tribal Court offers a wide variety of programs to help lawbreakers rehabilitate and regain their role in the community.

In addition to the Joint Family Wellness Courts, the Yurok Tribal Court operates more than two dozen programs, including: Yurok Wellness Court, Yurok Veterans Wellness Court, Yurok Legal Access Center, Youth Wer'er-gery Court, Skuy-ech-son' Batterers Intervention Program, Family Law Guardianships, Elder Nutrition Program, Yurok Elder Advocacy Program, Yurok Child Support Services, Youth At-Risk Program, Yurok Hey-wech-ek' Program, Yurok Reentry Program, Youth Wellness Court, Hoh-ke-pek' Program, Yurok

Tribe Wellness Coalition, Yurok Wellness Diversion Court, Joint Jurisdiction Court, and the To' Kee Skuy' Soo Ney-Wo-Chek' (MMIP) Project.

The Tribal Court operates one of the most developed Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP) programs. Earlier this year, the Tribal Court's To' Kee Skuy' Soo Ney-Wo-Chek' Program released a third and final report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous People in California. The in-depth report contains the first ever roadmap to guide tribal, state and federal agencies' response to new and existing MMIP cases. The Tribal Community Response Plan (TCRP) prescribes a set of actions that can be employed before someone goes missing or is murdered, when a missing person report is taken, whether foul play is suspected or not, and throughout the duration of long-term missing person and homicide cases. The Tribal Community Response Plan was constructed in such a way that other Tribes can adapt it to meet their unique needs. The Tribal Court is increasing its own capacity to address existing and future MMIP cases. The Court's newly formed prosecutor's office is dedicated to resolving MMIP and domestic violence cases.

The Court also established a policy analyst position to confront enduring systemic barriers that prevent tribes from fully responding to the crisis.

To learn more about the Tribal Court's MMIP work, please visit <https://yuroktribalcourt.org/programs/to-kee-skuy-soo-ney-wo-chek/>

For additional information on the Yurok Tribal Court, please visit - <https://yuroktribalcourt.org/>